

Civil War Book Review

Winter 2000

Article 27

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Recommended Citation

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth (2000) "Warfare And Word Play: A Postmodernist Rendering Of Civil War Memory And Literature," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss1/27>

Review

WARFARE AND WORD PLAY

A postmodernist rendering of Civil War memory and literature

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth

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Young, Elizabeth *Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War*. University of Chicago Press, ISBN 226960889

In **Disarming the Nation**, Elizabeth Young seeks to rectify the prevailing vision of the Civil War as a male exercise in nation build-ing and to discredit the prevailing view of the literature about it as a "complemen-tary story of patrilineal self-generation." Deploring the "myth of origins" that casts Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* as the emblematic white male novel of a white male war, Young insists upon the importance of white and African-American women's participation in the Civil War in both civilian and combat arenas. If Daniel Aaron and Edmund Wilson failed to find a great Civil War novel, it may have been because they were looking for it in the wrong places. Rather than puzzle about why "canonical" white male writers seemed unwilling or unable to capture the War in fiction, Young proposes that we turn our attention to the fictional and nonfictional writings of black and white women.

Young takes a somewhat conspiratorial view of men's Civil War writing, which she describes as a "remasculinization" of the War, one that purposefully "displaces the female author and reader from their foundational positions with-in the making of Civil War fiction." She finds gender implications in all of the various names that different groups applied to the War (War of Northern Aggression, War between the States, and so forth), but views the designation "Civil War" as especially rich in this regard.

Indeed the play upon the multiple meanings of "civil" and "civility" furnishes the main rationale for the book. For the war that interests Young has little or nothing to do with specific battles, combatants, or even outcomes. Her interests lie in the metaphoric possibilities of the relations between "civil" and gender. Civility, Young argues, represented both possibilities and constraints for

white and black women, who were simultaneously its agents and its objects, but her emphasis ultimately falls upon the ways in which civility thwarted women's freedom. Thus, she insists that as civility intertwined with the "interlocking grids of gender, race, and class," it "profoundly circumscribed social and psychic possibilities for women in nineteenth-century America."

Women writers, according to Young, have fully exploited the symbolic possibilities of the idea of a civil war, which they have used as a "multivalent cultural symbol" -- a "metaphor to represent internal rebellions, conflicts, and fractures." This perspective informs her own analysis of women's civil war writing, which, she believes, points to several conclusions: (1.) "the centrality of gender to the construction, political and literary, of nationhood"; (2.) the need for a shift in "the gender framework of the American literary canon"; (3.) that "women's Civil War writing presents a valuable opportunity to theorize the conceptual interdependence of gender, race, sexuality, and region in a concrete historical frame"; (4.) that "the axes of gender, race, and sexuality are divided not only in relation to each other, but also internally"; and, finally, that even as women's Civil War texts "gloss fractures of national identity, so too do they bring into view some deep faultlines, social and psychic, in female subjectivity."

Young does not claim to offer a comprehensive survey of women's writing about the Civil War or of the historical novel as a literary genre. Her interests lie in the play of memory and, especially, in metaphor, "less as a specific 's-thetic form than as a connective mode of representation, which brings together spheres -- such as female psyche and male nation -- that might otherwise be culturally distinct."

The language of civil war, she believes, permits writers to "thematize new forms of individual and national identity," frequently by means of a rhetoric that emphasizes division and rebelliousness. In this respect, Young clearly proclaims her allegiance to feminist readings of women's experience, especially those that dwell upon women's transgressions of boundaries, covert rebellions, and internal conflicts. To illustrate this general interpretation of women's relation to the War, Young focuses upon a selection of women writers whose work manifests the themes that interest her: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Keckley, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Margaret Mitchell.

Young's choices may strike some readers as idiosyncratic, not least because they exclude the many white Southern women writers who have directly and indirectly explored aspects of the War and its consequences. She nonetheless defends them for the evidence they offer of the ways in which women participated in the formulation of "foundational fictions," "invented traditions," "imagined communities," and "other modes of nation-building that might otherwise exclude or disempower them." In these works, she suggests, "the nation often becomes, symbolically speaking, feminized, transvestite, or protolesbian." Throughout the book, Young seems to be arguing that women's fictional transgression of social, racial, and sexual boundaries must complicate and enrich our understanding of the nation that emerged from the War. There can be no doubt that one of her main goals in writing the book lies in her determination to support feminist and postmodernist arguments about the arbitrary character of all social, racial, and sexual boundaries. The subject of cross-dressing especially attracts Young because it seems to confirm the arbitrary and artificial character of sexual differentiation.

In discussing Loreta Velazquez's *The Woman in Battle*, the narrative of her experience as a Confederate soldier, Young explores the significance of cross-dressing as an attack upon the manhood of Confederate soldiers. She presents Velazquez's cross-dressing or "passing" as "a strategic redefinition of femininity along with masculinity." By passing as a man, Velazquez "situates masculinity in the realm of performance." Young emphasizes the pleasure that Velazquez takes in her ability, when in male disguise, to seduce women, but acknowledges that Velazquez's pleasure in these seductions "corresponds to her antipathy toward any possible feminist body politic." In other words, her "most radical notions about gender and sexuality remain at the level of fantasy, divorced from the emerging social formations -- feminism and lesbianism -- to which their structures might seem to belong." Velazquez apparently enjoys the challenge of seduction but has no sexual desire for her "conquests." This is not an attitude that endears her to Young, for whom Velazquez's narrative above all confirms "the importance of metaphors in constructing bodies and the relations between them."

In the chapter on Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, Young returns to these themes with a vengeance, emphasizing Mitchell's feminization of Ashley, masculinization of Scarlett, and blackening of Rhett. Young especially delights in the opportunity to uncover and highlight manifestations of sexual -- and racial -- transgression, thereby vicariously challenging conventional proprieties and

boundaries.

She carries the focus on sexual and racial ambiguities into her "Afterword" in which she discusses contemporary Civil War reenactors and two contemporary writings, Rosellen Brown's novel, *Civil Wars*, and June Jordan's essay, "Civil Wars." Presenting Confederate reenactments as reactionary exercises in nostalgia, Young argues that "the collective impact of an admiring reanimation of the Confederacy is the renewal of racism." The shadow of the Confederacy looms over Brown's novel, which concludes with the female protagonist contemplating a new secession in the form of divorce from her husband. Jordan's "Civil Wars," in contrast, deconstructs the notion of civility itself, presenting it as "a dangerous fiction, which effaces emotion and polices politics." From these diverse stories, Young draws the conclusion that today, as during the 19th century, "women's civil wars' encompass multiple conflicts and point in contrary directions, both repressive and liberatory." In these conflicts, women still figure as "expatriates in the nation of the male war story," the outcome of which they nonetheless continue to shape, "fighting in the many ongoing battles -- at once internecine and uncivil -- among warring factions."

In the end, **Disarming the Nation** remains something of a puzzle. The book's conclusion, with its emphasis upon continuing struggles, seems to belie the "disarming" of its title, and such ambiguities pervade the text as a whole. Most readers will presumably have difficulty with the notion of feminism (an ideology) and lesbianism (a sexual disposition or practice) as "social formations," especially since Young does not explain her meaning in this regard.

The work as a whole eschews the political and socio-economic relations that we normally associate with social formations, just as it eschews the military campaigns and strategies that we normally associate with wars. Young does repeatedly insist that her primary interests lie in the metaphorical links between women's writing and historical experience, but she pays so little attention to historical experience of any kind, even that which directly affected women, that the substance and import of the metaphors remain elusive. It is difficult to shake the impression that **Disarming the Nation** is above all an exercise in self-reflexive word play -- an extended web of interlocking verbal free associations. The links among those associations may construct a dense tapestry of selected women's fictional responses to the interplay of the words "civility" and "war", but they do not obviously increase our understanding of the Civil War or its impact upon women's lives and thought.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese teaches southern history and literature at Emory University. Her books include Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South. She and Eugene D. Genovese are finishing The Mind of the Master Class, a study of the intellectual and cultural life of the southern slaveholders.